

The Biblical Unitarian Podcast - by Dustin Smith, PhD

Episode 365—"The Christology of Rev. 3:14"

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Introduction

Usually, when people want to talk about preexistence, they grab passages from the Gospel of John, from the letters of Paul (like Philippians 2 or Colossians 1), or sometimes from the Letter to the Hebrews in its opening chapter. It is rare that someone resorts to the Book of Revelation to argue that Jesus consciously preexisted his birth, but alas, this is where we are today, folks. Despite the fact that Revelation plainly illustrates Jesus' lineage from the line of Judah and the descendant of David, both of which prove that Jesus is a genuine member of the human race who came into existence after his forefathers Judah and David, and despite the fact that Rev 12:2-5 speaks of Jesus' birth, some have resorted to Rev 3:14 to argue that Jesus was conscious and alive before his birth.

Some translations of Rev 3:14 indicate that Jesus is the beginning of God's creation. Others will say that he is the ruler of God's creation. The better translations will pick one of these and be sure to footnote the other as a viable alternative. The reason for this is that the word for "ruler" and "beginning," the Greek noun *arche*, is grammatically ambiguous. In some contexts, it means

ruler, and in others, it means beginning. It can't mean both at the same time, so we have to choose.

Now, I know the tendency is just to pick the translation that suits your theology. But I don't want to do that today.

This week's episode will look at Rev 3:14 in order to determine what John the Revelator intended for his original audiences, the seven Asian churches, to understand by this descriptor of Christ. We will set the verse in its context, particularly in the context of the other introductions of Christ that occur in the previous six letters to the churches. I think there are good reasons why we should read Rev 3:14 as describing Jesus as the "ruler of God's creation," and that Jesus is already functioning in this position of rulership, even if the kings of the earth don't know it or refuse to recognize it.

What is Rev 3:14 all about, and does it prove that Jesus preexisted his birth as the first created person in God's creation?

Let's find out on this week's episode of the Biblical Unitarian Podcast!

1. A Close Look at Rev 3:14

- a. ἡ ἀρχὴ τῆς κτίσεως τοῦ θεοῦ
 - i. *Arche* means beginning or ruler.
 - 1. How do we know which definition the author intended? We have to look at the context.
 - ii. Is Jesus the beginning of God's creation?
 - 1. Beginning of the Genesis creation (an argument for literal preexistence)
 - 2. Beginning of the new creation
 - 3. Is Jesus the ruler of God's creation?
 - iii. We have to look in the context of Revelation itself.

2. Jesus' Titles in the Letters to the Seven Churches

- a. To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: 'The words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven golden lampstands.
(Rev 2:1)
 - i. And having turned I saw seven golden lampstands; and in the middle of the lampstands I saw one like a son of man (Rev 1:12-13)
 - ii. In His right hand He held seven stars (Rev 1:16)

- b. And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write: The first and the last, who was dead, and has come to life, says this: (Rev 2:8)
 - i. He placed His right hand on me, saying, "Do not be afraid; I am the first and the last, and the living One; and I was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore (Rev 1:17-18)
- c. And to the angel of the church in Pergamum write: The One who has the sharp two-edged sword says this (Rev 2:12)
 - i. out of His mouth came a sharp two-edged sword (Rev 1:16)
- d. And to the angel of the church in Thyatira write: The Son of God, who has eyes like a flame of fire, and His feet are like burnished bronze, says this (Rev 2:18)
 - i. He has made us to be a kingdom, priests to His God and Father (Rev 1:6)
 - ii. His eyes were like a flame of fire. (Rev 1:14)
 - iii. His feet were like burnished bronze (Rev 1:15)
- e. To the angel of the church in Sardis write: He who has the seven Spirits of God and the seven stars, says this (Rev 3:1)
 - i. John to the seven churches that are in Asia: Grace to you and peace, from Him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven Spirits who are before His throne (Rev 1:4)
 - 1. No clear reference in chapter one that indicates that Jesus has these seven spirits in his hand/power.
 - 2. If these seven spirits are the seven archangels of Judaism, then it would follow that the resurrected and highly exalted Christ would have authority over these chief angels.
 - a. Gabriel, Michael, Raphael, Uriel, Raguel, Sariel, and Remiel (see *1 Enoch* 20:1-8)
 - ii. In His right hand He held seven stars (Rev 1:16)
- f. And to the angel of the church in Philadelphia write: He who is holy, who is true, who has the key of David, who opens and no one will shut, and who shuts and no one opens, says this: (Rev 3:7)
 - i. I have the keys of Death and Hades (Rev 1:18)
- g. And to the angel of the church in Laodicea write: 'The words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of God's creation. (Rev 3:14)
 - i. and from Jesus Christ the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of kings on earth. (Rev 1:5)
 - 1. "Ruler" is *archon*, a word that is semantically related to *arche* but does not mean both ruler and beginning. It only means ruler.
 - 2. Rev 1:5's close proximity between the designations faithful, witness, and ruler makes for a persuasive parallel with Rev 3:14, where faithful, witness, and ruler all show up.

3. If all of the other letters to the seven churches draw upon descriptions of Jesus from Revelation chapter one, then we should read the description in Rev 3:14 in charity with this pattern.
4. Since Rev 1:5 describes Jesus as the ruler of the kings of the earth, we should read the ambiguous word in Rev 3:14 also as ruler, not as beginning.
 - a. Should we attempt to distinguish the creation of God mentioned in Rev 3:14 as either old creation or new creation? I don't think so, and there is nothing in the context that suggests such a distinction is necessary. Jesus is now the one who is ruling all creation, whether they recognize it or not. He is even ruling the kings of the earth, whether they recognize it or not. This is one of the truths that Revelation reveals, unveiling how God sees reality for those seven Asian churches.

Thanks for listening to this week's episode!

Join us next week as we explore the christology of Justin Martyr to see if he was a Trinitarian or even a proto-trinitarian.

Please look forward to our next episode.

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Producer and Editor: Dustin Williams | Host: Dustin Smith